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*Autograph Letter of COTTON MATHER, on  
WITCHCRAFT, presented to the Literary  
and Historical Society, by the Honorable  
Chief Justice SEWELL.*

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17<sup>th</sup> 6<sup>m</sup>, 1692.

Sr,

You would know whether I still retain my opinion about y<sup>e</sup> horrible Witchcrafts among us, and I acknowledge that I do.

I do still Think That when there is no further Evidence against a person but only This, That a Spectre in their Shape does afflict a neighbour, that Evidence is not enough to convict y<sup>e</sup> —— of Witchcraft.

That the Divels have a natural power w<sup>ch</sup> makes them capable of exhibiting what shape they please I suppose no body doubts, and I have no absolute promise of God that they shall not exhibit *mine*.

It is the opinion generally of all protestant writers that y<sup>e</sup> Divel may thus abuse y<sup>e</sup> innocent, yea, tis y<sup>e</sup> confession of some popish ones. And o<sup>r</sup> Honorable Judges are so eminent for their Justice, Wisdom, & Goodness that whatever their own particular sense may bee, yett they will not proceed capitally against any, upon a principle contested

with great odds on y<sup>e</sup> other side in y<sup>e</sup> Learned and Godly world.

Nevertheless, a very great use is to bee made of y<sup>e</sup> spectral impressions upon y<sup>e</sup> sufferers. They Justly Introduce, and Determine, an Enquiry into y<sup>e</sup> circumstances of y<sup>e</sup> person accused ; and they strengthen other presumptions.

When so much use is made of those Things, I believe y<sup>e</sup> use for w<sup>ch</sup> y<sup>e</sup> Great God intends y<sup>m</sup> is made. And accordingly you see that y<sup>e</sup> Eccellent Judges have had such an Encouraging presence of God with them, as that scarce any, if at all any, have been Tried before them, against whom God has not strangely sent in other, & more Humane & most convincing Testimonies.

If any persons have been condemned, about whom any of y<sup>e</sup> Judges, are not easy in their minds, that y<sup>e</sup> Evidence against them, has been satisfactory, it would certainly bee for y<sup>e</sup> glory of the whole Transaction to give that person a Reprieve.

It would make all matters easier if at least Bail were taken for people Accused only by y<sup>e</sup> invisible tormentors of y<sup>e</sup> poor sufferers and not Blemished by any further Grounds of suspicion against them.

The odd Effects produced upon the sufferers by y<sup>e</sup> look or touch of the accused are things wherein y<sup>e</sup> Divels may as much Impose upon some Harmless people as by the Representacôn of their shapes.

My notion of these matters is this. A Suspected and unlawfull com<sup>u</sup>nion with a Familiar Spirit, is the Thing enquired after. The communion on the *Divels* part may bee proved, while, for ought I can say, The *man* may bee Innocent ; the Divel may impudently Impose his com<sup>u</sup>nion upon some that care not for his company. But if the

com<sup>a</sup>union on y<sup>e</sup> man's part bee proved, then the Business is done.

I am suspicious Lest y<sup>e</sup> Divel may at some time or other, serve us a trick by his constancy for a long while in one way of Dealing. Wee may find the Divel using one constant course in Nineteen several Actions, and yett hee bee too hard for us at last, if wee thence ma<sup>k</sup>e a Rule to form an Infallible Judgement of a Twentieth. It is o<sup>r</sup> singular Happiness That wee are blessed with Judges who are Aware of this Danger.

For my own part if the Holy God should permitt such a Terrible calamity to befall myself as that a Spectre in my Shape should so molest my neighbourhood, as that they can have no quiet, altho' there should be no other Evidence against me, I should very patiently submit unto a Judgment of *Transportation*, and all reasonable men would count o<sup>r</sup> Judges to Act, as they are like y<sup>e</sup> Fathers of y<sup>e</sup> public, in such a Judgment. What if such a Thing should be ordered for those whose Guilt is more Dubious, and uncertain, whose presence y<sup>s</sup> perpetuates y<sup>e</sup> miseries of o<sup>r</sup> sufferers? They would cleanse y<sup>e</sup> Land of Witchcrafts, and yett also prevent y<sup>e</sup> shedding of Innocent Blood, whereof some are so apprehensive of Hazard. If o<sup>r</sup> Judges want any Good Bottom, to act thus upon, You know, that besides y<sup>e</sup> usual power of Govern<sup>es</sup>, to Relax many Judgments of Death, o<sup>r</sup> General Court can soon provide a law.

S<sup>r</sup>,

You see y<sup>e</sup> Incoherency of my Thoughts but I hope, you will also some Reasonableness in those Thoughts.

In the year 1645, a Vast Number of persons in y<sup>e</sup> county of *Suffolk* were apprehended, as Guilty of Witchcraft; whereof, some confessed. The parlament granted a special

com<sup>mission</sup> of *Oyer & Terminer* for y<sup>e</sup> Trial of those Witches; in w<sup>ch</sup> com<sup>mission</sup>, there were a famous Divine or two, M<sup>r</sup> *Fariclough* particularly inserted. That Excellent man did preach two sermons to y<sup>e</sup> Court, before his first sitting on y<sup>e</sup> Bench : Wherein having first proved the Existence of Witches, hee afterwards showed y<sup>e</sup> Evil of Endeavouring y<sup>e</sup> Conviction of any upon Defective Evidence. The Sermon had the Effect that none were Condemned, who could bee saved w<sup>thout</sup> an Express Breach of y<sup>e</sup> Law; & then tho' t'was possible some Guilty did Escape, yett the troubles of those places, were, I think Extinguished.

O<sup>r</sup> case is Extraordinary. And so, you and others will pardon y<sup>e</sup> Extraordinary Liberty I take to address You on this occasion. But after all, I Entreat you, that whatever you do, you Strengthen y<sup>e</sup> Hands of o<sup>r</sup> Honourable Judges in y<sup>e</sup> Great work before y<sup>m</sup>. They are persons, for whom no man living has a greater veneration, than

S<sup>r</sup>,

Your Servant

C. MATHER.

*For*

*the Honourable*

*John Foster Esq.*